

8. Religion

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DURING COLONIAL and empire times, religion occupied a large part of the lives of the landed aristocracy. The town of Vila Recôncavo had a Franciscan convent, a large mother church of the parish of São Gonçalo, and the chapel of the Third Order of Franciscans. In the rural area of the community nearly every plantation had its own chapel, which formed part of the owner's house, and its own chaplain to care for the spiritual needs of the landowning families and their slaves. Much of the wealth of landowners was used to build magnificent churches, to sponsor religious processions, and to maintain religious brotherhoods for laymen.

In this century, however, Catholicism is no longer the official state religion, the landowners no longer support the town church as they used to, and the Third Order of Franciscans has died out in Vila Recôncavo. Today members of the upper class (Class A) confine their support to the churches they attend in Salvador, leaving the local church to the mercy of God and to the gente pequena of the town. Visits from the Franciscans to celebrate Mass and give instruction for first communion have taken the place of the plantation chaplain and chapel. The priests today say that the people of the community have no intellectual basis for understanding religious teachings or beliefs. Consequently, they say that they now seek only to have as many as possible conform to the outer forms and rituals of the church and refrain from attending the African cults.

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In addition to the formal structure of the Catholic Church there arose, especially in the nineteenth century, many houses of African cultism, called in this region candomblé. The ad-

herents of these cults, female slaves and former slaves for the most part, followed a lengthy routine to become practitioners in the various cult houses and spent large sums of money, according to legend, on the required bracelets, necklaces, and clothing.

Today, however, the cult priests and priestesses have the same complaint as the Catholic priests. They say that young people no longer have the understanding or the patience necessary to prepare for devotion in the cult houses. The older priestesses deplore the degeneration of some of these houses and the admission of Indian spirits, which are now displacing the African gods.

Spiritualism has recently entered the community. So far it has been limited to few people in the community, although it is very popular in Salvador.

The use of the supernatural as described in Willems' Cunha does not take place in Vila Recôncavo. In Cunha the saints are asked to send rain whenever it appears that the crops are in danger. But in Vila Recôncavo, which lies in a semitropical rain area, there is no need for such invocations. Besides, these are large-scale economic crops, not subsistence produce on which the people depend directly for their living.

The Catholic Church in Vila Recôncavo

During the colonial period each religious parish was carefully delineated and conserved, but later political divisions cut across parish lines. This has made the use of colonial statistics very difficult. During colonial and empire times the church was the main census organ, but since parishes and counties do not coincide in their outlines the statistics are little help today in comparing the present with the past. Each parish built a mother church (matriz) in the parish town. Each of these churches had a patron saint, who was also the patron of the parish, and a resident priest or priests.

In the town of Vila Recôncavo, the county seat, a mother church was built, with São Gonçalo as its patron saint; also constructed was the Franciscan convent, connected with an opulent Third Order. As the Recôncavo entered its long per-

1. Emilio Willems, Cunha: Tradição e transição em uma cultura rural do Brasil (Sao Paulo, 1947), Chapter 7.

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 iod of decline, the parishes suffered financially; the buildings fell into a state of disrepair, and the parish priests were no longer replaced, for there was no money to support them. The Franciscans in town also suffered materially, and their personnel greatly diminished. About the time the empire ended and the republic began, the flow of young men and women into the religious orders ceased. At the end of the nineteenth century there were no longer enough Brazilian Franciscans to carry on the work in the convent, and a contingent of German Franciscans was sent to Brazil. Since that time, the Franciscans in Vila Recôncavo have been of German birth. Today there are only four Friars in Vila Recôncavo, three ordained priests and one lay brother.

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 One by one the county parishes were turned over to the Franciscans as the parishes became too poor to support their own priests, until today the three ordained Franciscans must care for the spiritual needs of five parishes. These include, in addition to the convent itself and the five parish churches, thirty smaller churches and chapels, all of which serve a population of over fifteen thousand people scattered over a wide area accessible only by canoe, foot, and horseback. Of these many churches, the only one which has a daily Mass is the Franciscan convent in the town of Vila Recôncavo, for there is always a priest there while the other two are traveling. On Sundays three Masses are celebrated in town: one in the convent, one in the mother church, and one in the small chapel in the lower part of town, commonly known as the fishermen's chapel. Only one town in all five parishes has a scheduled monthly Mass. This special effort is being made because, in the words of the priest, "There is a large religious movement there." In general it is understood between the parish people and the priests that when a town or smaller settlement wants a Mass celebrated the people fix a date for it and notify the convent. If possible, a priest fulfills the engagement, carrying his own robes, Book, Host, and chalices with him.

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 In addition to saying Mass, the priests are called upon to bless new houses, to give last rites to the sick, to take communion to the aged and infirm at home, and to teach the young children their catechism. Catechism is taught in the schools, and once a week the priest journeys to each school to teach. Near the end of the school year, First Communion is celebrated in the school or, if on a plantation, in the owner's house. The young children receive Communion first, and af-

ter them any others who want to receive it. Through the year
few people from the rural area go to hear Mass in town, un-
less they have asked for a special service in honor of their
patron saint or in the memory of a dead relative. They usually
wait for the priest's visit to their own locality. The same is
true of weddings and baptisms, which are often held up pend-
ing the arrival of the priest.

In case of death, the corpse is buried within twenty-four
hours. Each parish has its own cemetery, and the relatives
and friends of the dead carry the coffin there for burial. In
the parish of Vila Recôncavo, the cemetery lies just outside
the town. People from this parish, as well as those from the
town itself, take the coffin to the convent before burial to be
blessed, for there is always a priest there. Then they carry
the coffin to the cemetery. In the other parishes the dead are
buried without the benefit of a blessing, which will however
take place on the second of November, when priests try to
visit each cemetery and bless all the dead.

The many duties which have fallen upon the Franciscans have
made it almost impossible for them to continue the type of life
prescribed for those who enter an order. It is very difficult
for them to attend the retreats to which they should go; there
is little or no time for them to study or contemplate, or to
teach, for they have been faced with the discouraging reality
of trying to keep religion alive in a population too large and
scattered for proper contact to be maintained. In 1941 Vila
Recôncavo was described by the provincial canonical visitors
as "one of the greatest crosses of our Province, because of the
five decadent parishes entrusted to it."² The same book speaks
constantly of the "deplorable indifference" and "religious cold-
ness" of the people of Vila Recôncavo. In 1949 the statistics
of religious activities were as follows: 333 baptisms (184 le-
gitimate and 149 illegitimate children), 27 weddings, 200 First
Communions, 8,292 general Communions, and 80 Communions
for sick people.

As of today there are no religious brotherhoods in Vila Re-
côncavo. The last to pass out of existence was the Brother-
hood of the Most Sacred Sacrament, which was closed upon the
death of its treasurer early in this century. The Third Order
of Franciscans, formally closed in 1902, was reopened in

2. Livro de cronica do convento, Vila Recôncavo (MS in
Franciscan Convent, Vila Recôncavo).

Hail Mary. Some women say this process must be repeated three times in a row, others that it must be done each Friday for three weeks. This is a protective prayer "to take away the evil eye" (para tirar mau olhado). The thread which is used is taken away and carefully disposed of, by the person who prayed.

Conflict and Differential Participation

The attitude of the priests toward conditions in their parishes is one of resignation. They realize that it is physically impossible for them to take religion to all the people or even to the majority of them. Also, they are disheartened by the poor intellectual basis the people have for understanding the doctrine of the church. They do not discourage the group prayers, nor do they encourage them; they simply let them exist. But they vigorously combat African cultism. For several years the fishermen's chapel was closed because of the cult activities of so many of the women who attended the chapel. Recently, however, the Franciscan superior reopened the chapel, feeling that it was better not to exclude the entire fisherman population from the church because a few of them also participated in African cults. For it had turned out that when the chapel was closed all the people in the lower part of town refused to go up the hill to the convent and therefore passed several years without attending Mass, confessing, or taking Communion. In sermons given during Mass an opportunity to condemn cultism is never lost, even though it may have little effect. The local church policy toward cultism depends upon the feelings of each new superior and whether he will tolerate it. The priest who reopened the chapel became a much-loved person in the town, at least by the lower classes, for he realized how few people in the total population indulge in cult activities compared to the many who go to watch. The caretaker of one of the rural chapels is also a cult leader on his plantation, but relations between him and the priests are cordial. Although most of the female devotees attend the Masses for their particular saints, the priestess of the cult house never goes to church and avoids meeting the priests if possible.

Religion is more a part of the women's lives than of the men's, and there are more women than men at every Mass. There are a few strongly religious women (beatas) in the town

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them odd stories which were calculated to strike their imagination."³⁸

Public opinion expected of masters the acceptance of an offer made to manumit an infant on the occasion of his baptism.³⁹ It also became customary, when marriages were being solemnized in the master's family, to free one or two favorite slaves.⁴⁰ Masters frequently declined the money proffered by a Negro for his purchase and granted his freedom without payment.⁴¹ Slaves of the religious orders, it is said, considered themselves to belong to the saints themselves and were never sold.⁴² The law adopted in 1809 to protect the property of sugar planters against attachment for debt also provided that slaves need not be sold separately from an estate to satisfy a creditor's claims. Thus the master could not be forced to dispose of his slaves, unless the debt amounted to the value of the entire estate; and, as Koster has pointed out,⁴³ the slave in this way was advanced, in some degree at least, toward the condition of a serf.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Another custom which was advantageous to the slave was that of *alforrias na pia*, which was accomplished with the insignificant amount of 5 to 50 milreis and never was refused; this custom became very common, especially when the child had a light skin" (Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 255). Koster gives the price in Pernambuco early in the nineteenth century as £5 and says that "In this manner, a considerable number of persons are set at liberty; for the smallness of the price enables many freemen who have had connections with female slaves to manumit their offspring; and instances occur of the sponsors performing this . . . act. Not infrequently female slaves apply to persons of consideration to become sponsors to their children, in the hope that the pride of these will be too great to allow of their god-children remaining in slavery" (*op. cit.*, I, 195-96).

⁴⁰ Frank Bennett, *Forty Years in Brazil* (London, 1914), p. 111.

⁴¹ Ribeiro, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, I, 229 n.

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African costumes, songs, and dances.¹¹ The Catholic church was never in haste, it seems, to assimilate the Brazilian Negro but adopted instead a patient and tolerant policy which in the end was eminently successful. Early in the nineteenth century Koster wrote from Pernambuco, "No compulsion is resorted to, to make the Negroes embrace the habits of their masters; but their ideas are insensibly led to imitate and adopt them."¹²

As might be expected, the transition from fetish-cult ideas and practices to Catholic ritual and belief was marked by intermediary stages in which elements of both religions co-existed in the Negroes' thought and practice, and the objects of one cult were identified with objects of a similar nature in the other. Hence, the extensive identification, for instance, of several African *orixás* with certain Catholic saints (as we shall later see in greater detail) and the coexistence of African and European forms in the principal religious and popular festivals.

Thus, in 1852, a visitor wrote from Rio de Janeiro:

For many nights past, Gloria Hill . . . has echoed till a late hour with the songs, the wild music, and the tread of the dance in the Negroes' favorite amusements; and yesterday afternoon, I accidentally became a spectator of a grand gathering of this kind. It was "Twelfth" or "King's Day," as sometimes called—being that commemorative of the adoration of the Magi in the stable of Bethlehem; and it is a chief festival with the Negroes. . . . When about half way up the Lorangeiras . . . my attention was arrested by a large gathering of Negroes within an enclosure by the wayside, engaged in their native dances, accompanied by the wild and rude music brought with them from Africa. . . . Many of the principal performers, both among the dancers and musicians, were dressed in the most . . . grotesque manner. . . . A majority, if not all the performers, were baptized

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Op. cit.*, I, 300.

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help to satisfy the basic human needs for recognition and response. The resolution of all sorts of personal problems by way of the advice and counsel of the priest, priestess, or "manifesting" *orixá*, relieves personal strain and tension. And the reassuring affirmations regarding personal destiny which the body of belief affords, particularly at such times of crisis as the death of an intimate friend or relative, contribute to the apparently universal need of a sense of security.

Moreover, cult experiences serve as cogent means of maintaining group morale and enforcing group sanctions. The genuinely wholesome character of the Bahian *Africanos*, with the exception perhaps of certain individuals connected with recently organized *caboclo* centers, stands in sharp contrast to the personal disorganization which, according to report, characterizes the Rio de Janeiro Negro, whose *candomblé* (known locally as the *macumba*) is now in such a state of disintegration that many unwholesome and even vicious practices have crept into its ritual.

The Catholic church at Bahia, by exercising almost infinite patience and tact, has now incorporated into its organization all members of the Bahian fetish cults. Even the leaders of the *seilas* regularly attend Mass and, on occasion, participate, together with their entire *candomblé* personnel, in functions of the church. Thus, each year at an appointed time, *mãe de santo* Anninha takes her *filhas de santo*, dressed in their *bahiana* costumes, and her *ogans*, and attends Mass in Bomfim Church; as similarly does the *caboclo mãe de santo*, Sabina, in the *igreja* of Santo Antonio da Barra. Anninha, like certain other cult officials, is a member of a Catholic order. So far has the identification of many elements of the fetish tradition with Catholic ideology and practice now gone that to the simple minds of cult members

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there is little distinction between them. The *pae de santo* of a prominent Congo *seita* recently remarked, "I do everything (i.e., I carry on all cult rituals and ceremonies) in the name of the church."¹⁰

On the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the father of a well-known and widely respected *babalaô*, a special commemorative Mass was arranged in one of the city's principal churches. During the ceremony, a circle of friars who were standing with lighted candles about the bier was joined by an outer circle of Negro men, each bearing a funeral torch. Although the friars were probably unaware of the fact, the blacks were all *ogans* from the *candomblé* of *mãe de santo* Anninha. In the audience were more than a hundred important personages from the fetish world, including *babalaôs*, *paes* and *mães de santo*, *ogans*, and *filhas*. Said the *babalaô* whose father was being thus honored, "Last night at the *terreiro* we danced all night the African funeral dances for my father."

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In the minds of cult members several of the more important African *orixás*, as we have seen, have come to be identified with certain Catholic saints. Thus, Ogun, the *orixá* of war, is now identified with Santo Antonio; Oxóssi, the *orixá* of the hunt, with São Jorge; Oxalá, who to most members of the *candomblé* is "the greatest of the *orixás*," with O Senhor do Bomfim, who is, among the lower classes at least, the most important Catholic saint at Bahia;¹¹

¹⁰ This point of view obviously is not that of the Catholic church itself.

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¹¹ In Bomfim Church, which, with two rows of royal palms dominating its approach, occupies majestically the crown of a hill in Itapagipe, is a special room whose walls and ceiling are completely covered with photographs or plaster casts of crippled or diseased limbs or other parts of the body which have been, it is thought, miraculously cured of disease or other infirmity by the direct intervention of the saint. So great is his reputation for healing that thousands of people from miles around visit this shrine every year.

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829 The generally gentle and humane treatment that the owners reserved for their slaves and the efforts made by the Catholic clergy, from the beginning of the slave trade, to try to incorporate the /23/ Africans into the Catholic religion played an important role in the establishment of good relations between races in Bahia as throughout Brazil. Contrary to what occurred in the other colonial nations, where the aborigines and the imported slaves were kept in a state of segregation, like unassimilable "savages," in Brazil the natives and the Blacks were baptized, catechized, and admitted into the Church as men. Thus, numerous slaves, baptized Negroes, were no longer considered "beasts" and became "Christians," with the same title as the European colonists, having to endure neither hostility nor religious discrimination. They were taught the Christian doctrine, and the preachers endeavored to speak to them in their languages, chiefly in napô, which had become a sort of lingua franca in which the Africans of different origins were able to understand one another.

175 They intermarried; their marriage having been consecrated by the Church, this protected them when their masters intended to separate the spouses or sell one of the partners; they received the sacraments; they acted as witnesses in religious proceedings and participated as acolytes in religious ceremonies; they marched in the processions, carrying the standards and emblems of their brotherhoods; they were buried in the Christian cemeteries, the owners of slaves being obliged to call the priest in time to assist the dying. No one pretends by that to claim that their lives were free from suffering or that the Negroes were thus completely integrated in Catholicism. The clergy, the owners, and the civil authorities always allowed them some freedom concerning certain proceedings of their pagan cults and never forced them to embrace the official religion. They likewise permitted them to amuse themselves in their way by dances, songs, ceremonies (batuques), banquets in the manner of those of their countries of origin. From that comes this Catholicism somewhat mixed with fetishist beliefs and practices that constitutes the religion of a large part of the colored people of Bahia (1).

1. Roger Bastide, "Religion and the Church in

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Brazil," in Brazil, Portrait of Half a Continent,
p. 334.

Because of crossbreeding and other sociobiological factors, the darkest group of black phenotype was gradually absorbed by ethnic blending; the Whites increased at a slightly faster rhythm, while the number of métis registered in the statistics as pardos rose and gave birth finally, as a result of the mixture, to a group in which European ancestry predominated (2).

2. Donald Pierson, op. cit., p. 417.

"Among our ancestors there were already creoles of "clean belly" (barriga limpa). Their children, being themselves /24/ children of lighter men, tended progressively toward the color of their fathers. Perhaps Bahia is a city that contains many female Blacks and métisses of barriga limpa. Everybody remarks that we are moving toward a population totally of mixed blood but of white appearance (1)."

1. J. Valadares, op. cit., p. 91.

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In consulting the death certificates recorded between 1897 and 1938 (2),

2. A. Rabelo Leite, "A tuberculose do preto na Bahia /The tuberculosis of the Black in Bahia/"; Cesar de Araujo, Anais do 1º Congresso Nacional de Tuberculose /Annals of the First National Tuberculosis Congress/, Vol. I, 1930; see also E. F. Frazier, "The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil," American Sociological Review, Vol. VII, No. 4, 1942, p. 467.

one can see that the proportional quantities of each type varies in our city as shown below: